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The Impact of Mass Media on the Family

A Discussion Paper



THE PREMIER'S COUNCIL IN SUPPORT OF
ALBERTA FAMILIES



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Additional copies are available from:

Premier's Council in Support of Albert Families

Hilltop House, 9910 - 103 Street

Edmonton, Alberta T5K 0X8

Phone: 422-0475

Fax: 427-2117

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1. Introduction

Background

The Premier's Council in Support of Alberta Families was established in 1990, to advise the government on how its policies, programs and services may impact family life in Alberta.

To assist in doing that, the Council sought input on issues of concern to communities, and to families in particular, from Albertans across the province. Albertans were also asked to propose actions that would improve conditions for families. *Albertans Speak Out About Families* summarizes the results of this extensive public consultation process.

As a result of this input, the Premier's Council determined priority areas for immediate action. These are highlighted in a document entitled *Directions for the Future*. The impact of mass media on the family has been identified as a significant area for attention.

Purpose

This paper explores some of the issues regarding the impact of mass media, in the context of our changing values. It looks, more specifically, at how the various media may have influenced our current view of the world and at how that is shaping our attitudes towards families and family life.

The Premier's Council is interested in exploring what is contributing to the negativity and cynicism that is increasingly evident in society. We are also questioning how we can reverse that: how we can give children back their childhood and innocence; the innocence that comes from seeing the world through a vision of love and caring. We all have a role to play in this; the media can be a vital force in enhancing life or in diminishing it.

This discussion paper was prepared to provide information that will encourage people to critically evaluate the impact of media on their lives, so that actions can be taken to respond to the concerns that have been raised by Albertans.

Community groups, non-government organizations, media associations, families and government policy analysts are encouraged to review and discuss these issues. By reflecting on roles and responsibilities in supporting and strengthening families to respond to media issues, we may be better able to deal with the challenges and opportunities that mass media present to us.

2. What is Mass Media?

At an earlier time in our history, communication was largely of an interpersonal nature. Mass media emerged as a major influence when science and industry created the printing press, the camera, motion pictures, radio and television to communicate with larger audiences, that were at greater and greater distances from the messages being sent.

Mass media is very effective in sharing knowledge, entertaining, persuading people and socializing new members of society. It also needs an organization to run it and an economic base to keep it going. The various forms of mass media, such as movies, videos, television, newspapers, magazines, radio, and so on, rarely hear from and do not see their audience.

The immediate feedback from the audience is weak, unlike personal communication. Because the audience is very diverse in its interests and abilities, the people who manage the media are able to exert considerable influence. There will usually be some segment of society that wants to hear or see what is being offered.

Part of the strength of the adult audience is that they don't just receive the messages that are sent out, but that they seek out what appeals to them. They interpret what they see or hear according to their own beliefs and past experiences. Young people and children are not that sophisticated. Because the people who are sending out these messages are not present and because parents are not always available either, children rely on their own limited understanding or on their peers or role models to reinforce what they are seeing or hearing. It becomes extremely important for us to understand who their role models are and what kinds of messages they deliver.

In exploring some of the issues related to the impact of the media on society, this discussion paper will focus on the concerns that have been raised about television viewing, video games, movies and music.

3. The Impact of Mass Media

Why is There a Concern?

People's concerns about mass media have received a lot of attention from the media themselves in recent months. One has only to pick up a newspaper, magazine, a book or turn on the radio or television to read about or hear lively discussions on this topic. Many people are already asking if the various forms of mass media are having a negative impact on people in general, but particularly on children. Some of the research that has been undertaken on this topic will be referred to in this paper.

This is not a new issue. From the time of Plato, concern has been expressed about what is appropriate or damaging for children. What is new is that the information presented is getting more explicit, violent and controversial. At the same time, family life is undergoing significant changes. People's lives are very busy and filled with the competing demands of work, family and community responsibilities. Parents are not always available to see what children are exposed to and, more importantly, cannot always influence how their children are interpreting the messages that are being received.

Debate and discussion is important if we are to appropriately address the impact of the media. We need to better understand the impact that television is having on the family's view of the world. What will be the impact on individuals and families of the new *virtual reality* technology, which allows participants to become part of the fantasy they are viewing, and to control their media environment? Will they generalize this feeling of power and control to their real world? Is our dependence on such media as videos, television and movies jeopardizing the literacy skills of the young generation, as less time is spent on reading and fewer parents take time to read to their children? What changes in the development of children's imagination may be occurring? These and other issues will be explored as this review proceeds.

In today's world, each of us chooses what we want to read, see or listen to. There may be several televisions or radios in our homes. We buy our own printed materials and we see movies that appeal to us. Today, however, with more choices available, parents don't always know what is being viewed by their children. We often act as isolated individuals, even within our families. We don't always discuss with each other what we have heard or seen. This lack of discussion is contributing to a feeling of concern about the impact of the media, especially on children.

While there are many similarities between adult and teen attitudes, there are also some differences, especially in the areas of respect for honesty, hard work, and politeness.¹ Teens' acceptance of the images, words, and actions presented by the media often cause anxiety for parents who view some of these images as vulgar, at the very least. Some rock and rap lyrics are so explicitly violent and disturbing that parents are wondering what immediate and longer term impacts they may have on their children.

The explicit violence and sexual images in the media, particularly in movies and in video games, are also being examined for their impact on young people, especially in a time of increased violence in society. While acknowledging the relationship of poverty, abuse and alienation to violent behaviour, people are asking if the images communicated through the media are also contributing to this situation.

Points to Consider

1. What options do parents have if they are concerned about the messages that their children are getting from the media?
2. How can parents be better informed about what media messages their children are receiving?
3. What role can parents take in helping their children to understand what they are hearing and learning from the media?
4. How can parents be supported in this activity?

Shaping a View of the World: Helping us to Learn

Today's mass media exert a powerful impact on our view of the world. They inform, educate, advertise activities, goods and services, entertain and put us in touch with others who share our interests and views. They persuade, motivate us to express feelings and often stir us to action.

We rely on television, video, compact disks, radio, newspapers, magazines, films, and camcorders to learn of and record our activities, traditions, habits, and history. Media provide pleasure, understanding of other cultures, an expression of our hopes, desires and anxieties, and revelation of our social and medical ills and remedies. They have made us world citizens.

We are told what to eat, what to wear, what language to use, what toys to buy, what topics of conversation are socially acceptable, where we should holiday (and what wildlife we can expect when we get there) and to what religious or charitable organizations we could send our money, all courtesy of the media. Media has become our culture, not just an expression of our culture.

Television has become one of the most powerful of the various media available and turning it off will not make its influence go away.² Not that we have shown any inclination to do so. The "average" Albertan watched 21.9 hours of television per week in 1989, compared to a Canadian average of 23.4 hours per week. Alberta's teens watched 17.0 hours per week, while our 2 to 11 year olds watched 18.8 hours per week.³ It is interesting to note the variation for teens. Their viewing time ranged from 14 to 35 hours per week and *that doesn't include any recognition of time spent on movies, music, videos, arcade games, computer software, magazines or comics.*

To translate the time we devote to television: if we watch 3 hours per day, from age 5 to 65 years, we will have devoted 14 years (of 12 hour days) of our lives to television. Much of that exposure will have been the world's finest and most creative artists and communicators. Some exposure will have been to a series of violent programs, where the line between murderous, fictional mysteries and documentaries will be very fine, indeed. We will also have been exposed to people who want to influence our attitudes about politics, news, education, religion, science and sports. Children, whose lives have been influenced by the media, may have an entirely different view of the world, **for that reason alone.**

It has been noted that when music, newspapers, and magazines are factored in, *the average teen spends about 8 hours a day with some form of mass media.*⁴ Children, adolescents and adults have all been shown to acquire a wide variety of information, ideas, attitudes and behaviours from the media, especially from television. By controlling what we get to see of the world, **and what we don't get to see,** the media has a significant role in influencing our perception of what is real in the world.

It has been suggested that "all" television is educational television. The only question is "what is it teaching?" Images are carefully constructed to present a reality, but whose reality is it? In a study recently released (February, 1992) by the Association of Human Services in Alberta, Albertans ranked concern about the impact of violence and sex in the media on families at 5.74 on a seven point scale. It was fourth in an extensive listing of concerns. The fact that so many people share these concerns seems to indicate that there is a growing public concern about the role of media in our lives.

The Development of Values

The uneasiness many people feel about television stems from the sense that this medium is changing our lives in ways we cannot measure and may not even notice.⁵ Considering that a child will spend more of his time watching television than engaging in any other single activity, except sleeping, there is good reason to perceive that this is an issue to be addressed. Children learn from role models and from the messages they are exposed to, especially if they are repeatedly reinforced. Who is there to help them to learn which of the behaviours they are exposed to represent acceptable behaviours and which do not?

The issue becomes complex. Do we just condemn what we don't like or instinctively feel is not appropriate, or should we try to talk about what is appropriate for children and youth and what should be left to adult discretion?

What is propaganda; what reflects community standards; what constitutes racial or sex role stereotyping? Many forms of mass media exploit women and present extremely prejudiced views of minority groups. Do we want our children to be immersed in a culture where "alien" means enemy? Do we want them to think cold, brutal robots are to populate our future? What is the impact of images on our behaviour? Are the images that are presented as irony to adults being taken at face value by young people? We think they may be. Are we presenting ideals of women and men that are impossible to achieve? The incidence of eating disorders and low self-esteem suggest that this is so. What happens when a child's reality and the ideal don't fit? Dr. Don Offord, a child psychiatrist at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, suggests that what children see on television may cause them to become ashamed, angry, or disappointed with their own life situation. Violence portrayed through the media can push vulnerable children over the edge. Some suggest that this can also have a significant impact on adults.

We need to challenge the messages that are being presented and acknowledge the influence, both positive and negative, that the media has in determining the way we live our lives.

There are no pat answers to the questions just raised. Our standards and ethics prevent us from conducting the kind of research that could prove, conclusively, that there is a causal relationship between exposure to images and messages and the demonstration of behaviours that reflect those images. What we have learned, however, is that what is taken from the media is influenced by individual perspectives, needs, and concerns.

Points to Consider

1. What do we appreciate most about the media we use?
2. How can we, as parents and concerned citizens, make the best use of the strengths and positive effects of the media?
3. What aspects of the media cause us concern?
4. How can parents determine what role models are influencing their children?
5. How much exposure to the media is appropriate? What other activities are being sacrificed by the family when television, videos and computer games are used extensively?
6. How can parents have greater influence in helping their children choose positive values, attitudes and role models?
7. Are the images our children are exposed to through the media having a positive or negative impact on their understanding of other points of view? How can we influence that?

Particular Areas of Concern

Media Violence - Is it Making Our Society More Violent?

Because violent behaviour appears to be increasing, this discussion will address two of the concerns that the public has recently been expressing. Two facts are clear: (1) a considerable amount of mass media content is heavily saturated with violence; and (2) people are spending much more time being exposed to this material.⁶ Is this contributing to real violence in society?

Most of us agree that the media is an effective and powerful tool in the classroom. It is used to dramatically demonstrate the powerful images of nature in geography and geology classes; stimulate discussion on current affairs and present scientific concepts clearly. We also acknowledge, through the billions of dollars dedicated to advertising in print and motion picture media (\$11 billion in Canada), that media messages influence us. The media have been largely responsible for creating a consumer mentality, which has increased consumerism overall. This is not necessarily a problem, as it has also contributed to our economy.

People generally acknowledge that we learn a lot about the world from the media; however, we are reluctant to admit that people can learn to act out the negative behaviours that are also learned through these same media. Despite research that has been done to date (over 900 studies, as of the mid-80's) on the effects of TV violence on behaviour, we still are not clear about its effects. Some research has shown that there is no relationship between viewing and subsequent behaviour.⁷ Where research has pointed out that exposure to violence through the media does increase aggressive behaviour,⁸ it has sometimes been questioned on methodological grounds or on the interpretation of data.

Some study results do, however, show that as little as three and a half minutes of violent TV viewing can influence children to increase aggression towards another.⁹ Others suggest that it is important to consider the long-term effects on behaviour before we can determine the impact of television violence.

While overall the research literature has emphasized that there is very little consensus on the impact of viewing violence on behaviour, it is nevertheless important to highlight research findings that address concerns.

Those who indicate a concern about continuing with the status quo have noted the following:

- media violence gets people worked up

- if media content is perceived as literally real, it is more arousing/disturbing
- media violence provides a source for modelling behaviour
- children are more impressionable, more susceptible to media messages than are adults
- people who are emotionally or intellectually disadvantaged are less likely to be able to gauge the reality of the context -- they are more readily aroused by media violence
- an emotionally troubled individual can be influenced by a single extreme media episode
- a single violent episode can provide a role model or suggest techniques that a troubled individual would imitate
- repeated exposure to using violence as a technique for handling interpersonal relationships and enforcing social controls can lead to acceptance of violence by individuals and authority figures
- media violence can dull sensitivities to the horror of real violence; people become desensitized

The La Marsh Commission (1976)¹⁰ indicated its concern that because media violence is so pervasive and frequent, it offers the potential for imitation, increased stress, desensitization and distorted views of reality. Commission members also noted that advertisers and broadcasters rank social responsibility well below economic considerations. Media violence makes money. While many people express concern about media violence, most don't stop watching violent programming, nor do they want it to disappear. Freedom of choice takes precedence.

Freedom of choice is a cornerstone of our society; it is part of the very fabric of our traditions and history. However, the question is whether there are adequate, healthy alternatives from which to choose.

Some research has found that it is the **amount** of TV viewing that makes a difference in influencing people. With more than two hours of viewing, the viewer becomes more tolerant or apathetic about violence, more involved in violence, more aggressive, more defensive and more likely to over-estimate real-life violence and do things like buy a weapon and/or home alarm system.¹¹

This raises the question of whether living in areas where violence and death are a part of life (ie., urban areas where drug use, gambling, and alcoholism are more prevalent) increases the effect of televised violence, as it is reinforced in an individual's personal reality. Lazarfeld and Merton¹² found that television violence is "most effective" when it is reinforced by face-to-face contacts or interactions of an aggressive kind. These actions legitimize, reinforce and confer status on violent acts. What are the implications for children who are exposed to violence in their everyday lives?

There are many causes of violence. Perhaps it is now time to ask if the influence of the media is as strong as other factors are that create stress for families, such as poverty, unemployment, and family breakup. All of these factors must be considered when actions to reduce violence are being planned.

Perhaps one of the problems with what current research has shown, and why the interpretation of results is so contradictory, is that they have often focused on short-term responses. The real effects may be felt over an extended period, as repeated violent images make some types of behaviour acceptable, especially for children. Do children come to be persuaded that violent behaviour is a normal response?

Even if there is no consensus on the impact of media violence on people's behaviour, there is increased public sensitivity to this issue. In exercising a greater shared responsibility in controlling our use of media violence, we need to use common sense and determine what is acceptable, in order to ensure the protection of our children. The public needs to acknowledge that there are differing perceptions of what constitutes acceptable standards and work towards strategies that will respond to audience concern. What are the moral and social factors? Rather than trying to define violence, it may be preferable to focus on the multiple forms and expressions of violence that the public considers to be unacceptable. We then must develop strategies that respond to community and/or individual family needs.

Points to Consider

1. Are we seeing violent behaviour from our children that imitates the programming they are exposed to? What can we do about this?
2. Does the environment that our children are living in reinforce the violence they see on television? If so, what can we do to change that?
3. Is violent programming considered to be a problem in our community?

Sexually Explicit and Sexually Violent Material - What is its Effect?

The issue relating to *sexually explicit* material, whether presented through videos, movies, magazines or music lyrics, has received an increasing amount of attention. Parents may be unaware of the explicitness of the messages being conveyed through some rock and rap recordings. Research indicates that exposure to *sexually explicit materials* has a different impact than does exposure to *sexually violent* material. *Sexually violent* material has been shown to influence people to commit sexually aggressive acts.¹³ Exposure to *sexually explicit* material has not been shown, conclusively, to have this effect. However, the relationship may be indirect and equally damaging. The U.S. Attorney General Commission on Pornography (1986) found, for example, through its survey, that respondents felt that sexually explicit material dehumanizes women and that it causes both *men and woman to lose respect for each other*.

Certainly, this is unacceptable in a civilized society.

As with research studies on the impact of media violence on behaviour, the research on the impact of sexually explicit and sexually violent media messages is not consistent. It is useful, however, to be aware of some of the findings.

For example:

- *if men already perceive women as less powerful and as justifiable targets of aggression, then extensive viewing of televised violence could increase violence against women. Media violence has more impact on this relationship than does erotica or erotica plus violence.*¹⁴
- consumption of pornography is an indirect indicator of the degree of hostility towards women in a given area.¹⁵
- sexually explicit films have undesirable effects *only* when sexual explicitness is mixed with violence.¹⁶
- by contrast, other research has shown that the use of sexually explicit material has been *linked* to rapes committed by rapists and child molesters. While the relationship is unclear, it is likely to be used as part of a *planned preparation to offend*.¹⁷
- consumption of sexually explicit material is more common among those convicted offenders who had a large number of victims.¹⁸
- children and adolescents who participate in the production of pornography experience adverse effects.¹⁹
- prolonged use of sexually explicit material increases the belief that less common sexual practices are more common than they may be.²⁰
- sexually explicit material that portrays sexual aggression as pleasurable for the victim increases the acceptance of the use of forceful persuasion in sexual relations.²¹
- acceptance of forceful persuasion appears to be related to sexual aggression.²²
- in the short-term, exposure to violent, sexually explicit material increases punitive behaviour towards women.²³
- self-report studies failed to document a positive causal relationship between aggression and exposure to sex magazines; where higher rates of aggression and exposure to sex magazines exists, the effect was thought to be due to macho cultural patterns in an area.²⁴ In areas where macho cultural patterns were not as evident, the relationship between exposure to sex magazines and aggression was also not evident.

The most significant finding, one that influenced the Canadian Supreme Court's ruling on sexually violent material as obscene and eligible for banning, is that pornography creates an attitude that women are objects and can be abused. This increases the likelihood that women will be seen as appropriate, acceptable targets of violence.

The U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986)²⁵ demonstrates the difficulties associated with translating research findings into action or change. This survey, as mentioned previously, indicates that respondents believe that pornography dehumanizes women and causes men and women to lose respect for each other. HOWEVER, respondents also indicate that:

- pornography is a legitimate form of sex education
- this material improves a viewer's sex life
- the majority oppose government efforts to control pornography
- 65% want pornography to be protected by freedom of speech and the press
- people believe that exposure to mass communication has a greater effect on others than on themselves.

Clearly, determining community standards is a challenge! So is raising public awareness.

Points to Consider

1. What can be done to limit the availability of *sexually violent* materials?
2. What strategies are appropriate for dealing with young people's exposure to *sexually explicit* and *sexually violent* material?

Media as a Substitute for Social Interaction

Do we also need to review our dependence on having movies, video games, comics or television babysit our children? Do we know how children interpret what they are seeing? Often, what is intended when media messages are constructed is not what children are hearing or understanding. Is the television or video game taking the place of playing with friends, reading or other recreational activities for our children? Has it become an escape or refuge?

As "docudramas" are now blurring the distinction between reality and fantasy, with news and entertainment being presented through the same program, how will children's learning from television and other forms of mass media be affected? Parental influence can have a significant effect on how children respond to messages. Parents' use of media also influence their children's habits and mental health. "Television viewing is a major joint activity among children and parents and has been associated with higher levels of loneliness among children."²⁶

So we then have to ask what media, under what conditions, lead to what effects, among which children, and to what end?

Points to Consider

1. How can we ensure that our children are interpreting the information they receive in a positive way?
2. What can parents do to help their children distinguish fantasy from reality?
3. What positive choices should be available to help influence a child's or young person's growth and development?
4. What kind of programs should be available for family viewing?

4. Influencing Media Consumption - Possible Approaches

Clearly, adults and children are entertained and informed by the media. How we are affected by the images, values and behaviours we are exposed to depends on our age, values, principles and life experiences. Generally, this means that who we are and how we see life will influence what we take from media content. The impact on children is necessarily going to be greater, as they are more vulnerable to new messages and influences.

Children's view of the world must be guided and developed within a socially acceptable framework. They passively absorb images and ideas. How children's attitudes and behaviours are developed is a matter of importance and consequence to parents, educational institutions, the community and ultimately, government. We all have a role to play in addressing these issues.

Peter Sheehan, from the University of Queensland, Australia²⁷, expressed his preferred options for dealing with the impact of media messages on children. He stressed:

1. Placing more emphasis on parental responsibility to their children.
2. Banning extreme sexual violence.
3. Placing the onus on distributors and retail agencies to classify materials in a way that gives clear information to adults.
4. More effective control on the sale and display of adult tapes to minors.
5. Introducing penalties for unlawfully distributing sexually violent materials.

These and other strategies need to be considered in order to develop more open, responsible interactions between the media industry, parents and children.

Since there is no single solution to this problem, we need to explore a variety of approaches. One option is media education. Another is regulation, either self-imposed or externally enforced, as in censorship. Perhaps there are instances where each is particularly effective.

Regulation

Background

Regulation of mass media can range from voluntarily self-regulating media content, to having regulations or guidelines imposed, to outright censorship.

Canadian governments are reluctant to impose strict all-encompassing regulations, recognizing that Canadians place a high value on freedom of choice. Censorship is seen as too harsh an option. Another option is to work with the media to encourage better programming and voluntary self-regulation.

Self-Regulation

Constructive recommendations from the public may assist in this process. Opinions differ on the degree to which self-regulation is currently working. The chairman of the Canadian Radio-television Commission (CRTC), Keith Spicer, has stated that there is a link between violence on TV and increasing violence in society. The relationship may not have been proven to be causal, but "common-sense also tells us that this must be so".²⁸ The CRTC does not wish to become a censor; it only encourages the Canadian Association of Broadcasters to voluntarily reduce violent programming. That "encouragement" has recently increased in depth.

The CRTC has indicated that it expects broadcasters to develop their code on violence and implement self-regulation regarding violence, sexual stereotyping and employment equity or they will get a rough ride at license-renewal time. As sixty-five percent of licenses come up for renewal by 1994, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters is now working with Spicer to rewrite its rules regarding violence on the air.²⁹

Rating Material

Spicer has also indicated that all sources of programming being shown on Canadian television should be rated, including cable, satellites, U.S. network shows and rental videos. A new, very strong broadcast code on violent programming is expected soon. The concern is, however, that it may make Canadian TV so politically correct that it may not be able to compete with cable.

Former M.L.A. John McInnis proposed a bill in the Alberta Legislature to make it an offense to rent a video classified as adult to a minor. Manitoba passed similar legislature in 1991. Some M.L.A's have publicly stated their support for a more hands-off approach, saying that the video industry is adequately policing itself and that parents have a role to play in censoring their children's viewing habits.

Current Status

A range of regulatory options is certainly being exercised. Is this enough? The Canadian Broadcasting Standards Council has stated that there is not much real evidence of public concern over violent programming. In 1991, only 101 formal complaints were received by them, ten of which related to violence on TV.

Most of the complaints received were about sex-role portrayals and biased news coverage. "Most Canadians just want to watch whatever they want."³⁰ This is not just a Canadian perspective. *Newsweek* magazine reported that a 1985 Gallup poll indicated that a majority of Americans want *sexually violent materials* banned, but *did not want* tighter restrictions on sexually explicit materials. A high public tolerance for sexually-oriented material was also clearly evident.³¹

Some people feel that sexually explicit material can be instructive and improve their own relationship. However, most also acknowledge that *sexually violent* material, including negative images of rape, abuse, torture, and so on, can be harmful and should be censored.

Strategies for Action

Parents can attempt to regulate what their children are exposed to and children can learn to exercise good judgement, with coaching. Media distributors can also be more conscientious about what they show to the public, especially during prime-time. The community also can become much more involved. By forming interest groups and monitoring what is presented through the media, they can have an impact on ensuring that the regulations are adhered to and enforced. Media Watch, a Vancouver based advocacy group, is one such example.

Points to Consider

1. What factors should influence a parent's decision about what children should be exposed to through the media?
2. How can parents help their child to be discerning about what they watch on television, in videos or at the movies?
3. What is the role that media distributors can play to ensure that children are not negatively influenced by media messages?
4. Does government have a role to play in the presentation of information through the media?
5. How can parents develop credibility and influence with their children, in the areas of media program selection?

Censorship

Background

The Canadian Supreme Court ruling on what constitutes obscenity and can, therefore, be censored, stated in March, 1992, in *Butler verses Her Majesty the Queen* that:

"it is legitimate for government to outlaw pornographic magazines and films, if it could show that the materials "degraded" women, thus compromising their equality"

The implication of this ruling is that obscenity exists if women's collective rights are denied. Violent pornography, which degrades and dehumanizes women, contributes to a general atmosphere in which violence against women can flourish. This ruling recognizes that pornography can lead to harm to women. The portrayal of *sex coupled with violence* constitutes obscenity, as do sexual acts involving children, people portrayed in servile submission, humiliation and subordination. Freedom of expression cannot be used as an excuse for spreading the worst, most debased forms of violent pornography, especially when that right violates the right to equality and undermines personal safety.

In June 1993, Bill C-128 was approved, amending the *Criminal Code* of Canada to specifically prohibit child pornography in order to better protect children from the harmful effects of child sexual abuse and exploitation. The new laws convey the message that children are not appropriate sexual partners. Visual materials are prohibited if they involve or promote the sexual use or exploitation of persons under 18 years old. Written materials are prohibited if they advocate any sexual activity with children that would be an offence under the *Criminal Code*.

New offences have been created to prohibit the possession and importation of child pornography and maximum sentences have been increased with respect to the production, sale, and distribution of child pornography.³²

Clearly, there are areas where censorship is necessary. However, there are still concerns about how effectively censorship can be used as a means of controlling violent or sexually explicit material.

Current Status

The reality of today is that people want the freedom to access a wide range of programming. Pay TV currently shows R-rated movies. Telephone sex lines and "virtual reality" are setting the pace for tomorrow's consumption. "Virtual reality" is a computerized visual and sensory system, wherein the viewer is a participant in a myriad of sexual or other fantasies.³³

Cable TV has few restrictions, since only Canadian signals are regulated, which makes the number of signals that regulators can control quite small. The Motion Picture Association of America issues ratings on films, but cable broadcasting companies are not required to provide the ratings to their customers.

Internet is a computer networking system that makes academic and scientific information available. It has recently added the ability to pull up erotic information. This is an *international* computer network that offers non-mainstream sex, obscenity and pornography. It is a free medium – there is no filtering of ideas or photos and it is very popular. In April, 1992, DEC Network Systems Laboratory of Palo Alto, California, surveyed more than 1500 computer user groups and found that three of the ten most used bulletin boards in the world were the sex-bondage pornography ones. The system is connected by hundreds of thousands of computers, linked by long-distance, high capacity lines leased through telephone companies. Students, or the general public, can pay to hook into the respected Internet system and then get connected to the alternate menus.

Deathstar Satellite, America's Hughes Corporation's planned satellite launch for 1994, will be able to provide signals to satellite dishes that are the size of a cookie sheet. These signals from the United States will be able to bypass Canadian regulators altogether. The cost to consumers will be approximately \$1000 - \$1500. Owners will have the option of blocking out shows, according to their rating, but there is no way that consumers can be prevented from hooking-in. They will be able to deal directly with a U.S. company. Further, Fibre-Optic Technology will make 200 or more channels available to urban and rural viewers over telephone lines. Light can be used to transmit TV, telephone and computer signals to any Albertan who wants to receive 100 cable channels for a monthly fee, or to access videos-on-demand.³⁴

With illegal trade in pornography currently estimated at \$500 million yearly, in Canada, it is more than obvious that sex sells. Pornography is one of the growth industries in North America, worth \$10-12 billion, yearly.

A 1989 York University study showed that by the age fourteen, 90% of boys and 60% of girls had viewed pornography.³⁵

Strategies for Action

Can government continue to offer the illusion of control and protection or should additional ways be developed to deal with questionable or controversial media content?

Clearly, advances in media technology make it difficult to totally regulate consumption of violent, disturbing or misleading broadcasting. We must, however, explore options for moving from expecting others to solve our problems to exercising more individual control and empowerment.

Individuals and community groups can effectively exercise their influence by letting government and media distributors know when television programming or other media offend them, through aggressive write-in campaigns to express their views.

Points to Consider

1. When, if ever, is censorship appropriate?
2. If censorship is appropriate under some circumstances, how should these decisions be made?
3. How can censorship achieve a desired result? How can we ensure that it does not *increase* the product's desirability?
4. How can we best prepare for the myriad of new technologies that will make access to all kinds of information virtually unlimited?
5. What role should the media assume in the programming decisions that are made?
6. What role should parents and citizens assume in media programming decisions?

Media Education

Background

Media education has been defined by UNESCO as: "the ability to read, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms. It is concerned with developing an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the mass media, the techniques used by them, the impact of these techniques and a consideration of the many ways media produces meaning."³⁶

UNESCO declared, in 1982, that it is a major challenge to promote media awareness. Media education focuses on encouraging individual responsibility.

Through media education, we learn to analyze what we are seeing. This is done by recognizing that:

1. The meaning you get from images is based on your own experiences and your choices and decisions about how you will respond;
2. What is presented is not reality; it is not a window on the world, but a world made up by writers, producers, etc.
3. There are perspectives and values behind all media messages; even the furnishings in a program communicate standards or ideals of what our lifestyle should include.
4. Media use identifiable techniques: such as motions (tilting one's head, raising eyebrows, etc.) to indicate specific meanings. Similarly, stereotypes of people, places and events, can be used to convey meaning.
5. Media are businesses with commercial interests: their primary goal is to make money and they target their messages to attract people with disposable incomes.

Through media education, people become more aware of how media constructs reality and influences perceptions, values and cultural identity. It also helps people to become active, not passive, consumers. By understanding who benefits from the messages presented, we can change the way we respond to it and change the mass media ourselves, by deciding what we want to watch, in a more enlightened manner.

While there is a lot of public demand for increased media regulation, in the long run it may not be as effective as media education. There is no quick fix solution to issues like sexual violence in the media. Media education is a lifelong process, but one that has been shown to be effective in countries where it has been offered for more than one decade.³⁷ Recognizing that television and film form a substantial part of children's experience out of school, children should be given the opportunity to develop the skills that will help them to understand what has become such an integral part of their culture.

This kind of empowerment is what democracy is really about – it is more effective, powerful and long-lasting than is asking to be "protected" from everything we don't like. We must learn to increase our awareness of what the media is trying to communicate to us, whose values are being presented and why. And we must talk about this issue.

Current Status

The fact that censorship often increases the interest and commercial value of a media product (a movie or book's being banned is often used as an advertising gimmick) and that "hit lists" of sexually violent rock lyrics are outdated by the time they're made, makes censorship, alone, a less than adequate strategy.

It assumes that we can build a bubble around our children that will protect them for a lifetime.

This point is reinforced when one considers that of the 75,000 copies of Madonna's *Sex* that were sold, in Canada, the majority were sold to *young professionals*, aged 25 to 40 years, who represent the "baby boom" portion of the population. More women than men bought the book, by a ratio of 2 to 1. This may indicate an expansion of sexual erotica into more socially acceptable areas than has been the case in the past.

Strategies for Action

Children and adults need the tools to make good choices. They need to develop critical thinking skills, to be made aware and to be shown how they can make changes themselves. The negative impact of the media can be reversed or controlled, for example, by having parents verbally disapprove of the violent acts that their children are watching, as they are watching them. Parents who reflect their positive values and provide effective role models for their children can also counteract the negative images that children may be seeing. A list of suggestions for parental action is included in Appendix I, ranging from giving children an "allowance" of television viewing hours, to planning Saturday morning activities and outings to avoid exposure to violent cartoons and advertisements aimed at children. Parents can help manage their family's exposure to the media, and help children learn to make better decisions concerning media consumption.

Schools can offer programs on how students can critically view the messages that are presented through the media. "Children need to develop critical viewing skills, and home and school are the primary contexts for teaching them."³⁸

Communities can also become involved by making information available about media education and holding workshops on this topic.

Points to Consider

1. How can critical skills be developed in people, especially children, to help them to make appropriate decisions regarding media consumption?
2. What role do parents, educators, governments, the media, etc., have in this process?
3. How can we become more discerning media consumers?

5. Next Steps

The impact that the media has on our lives can be unlimited, if we choose to let it be. By learning to make responsible choices, we can benefit from the many advantages that it offers, while limiting its negative impacts. By openly discussing what will work, we can better prepare our families to survive and flourish in a media-saturated world. The influence that the media can exert is impressive, if it is used responsibly.

The potential for using this powerful medium for growth and change is enormous. We can use our time with children to enjoy positive experiences and teach them to make wise choices. It has been noted that part of the damage that can be done by television lies in what it prevents; for example, it prevents the talks, the games, the family festivities and even the arguments through which much of a child's learning takes place and character is formed.³⁹ By leaving children alone to cope with obscene or extremely vulgar, violent, sexist lyrics and images in music, movies, television programming and sexually explicit or violent magazines, we may be narrowing their viewpoint. We may also be limiting their opportunities for becoming well-balanced, literate individuals and members of a caring society.

The Premier's Council has prepared this discussion paper to highlight some of the concerns that have been raised about the impact of the media on family members. By increasing the awareness of how the media affects family life; focusing on questions that parents, educators, industry representatives and individuals can consider in addressing the issue; and providing some suggestions for parental, school and community action; it is hoped that Albertans can work together to develop the most effective strategies for responsible media use in the future.

6. Appendix I: Taking Action!

Violence in the Media and the Parent

The following suggestions for parental action were presented by S. McCann, at the 1993 Forum on Violence in the Schools, in Edmonton, Alberta.⁴⁰ They are reprinted here as an example of the strategies that parents could consider to help their families and particularly children, to better manage their media consumption.

Parents are worried about the effect of violent video entertainment on their children, but most feel powerless when addressing this issue. Many are convinced that nothing short of confronting the multinational media entertainment corporations could possibly make a difference. Are we forgetting that the "clean air" movement began with just a few concerned individuals who were willing to take a stand against pollution and raise our awareness of the environment? The *ANTI-VIOLENCE CAUSE* will also succeed when individual parents take steps to regulate their family exposure to violent entertainment products. Here are some suggestions to try in your home:

- Watch television with your children whenever possible. Be aware of the programs they see outside the home and encourage them to talk about what they have seen.
- Give your children a weekly "allowance" of television viewing hours. Help them select programs appropriate to their age and interests. Circle each child's selections in the weekly TV guide.
- Create a collection of pretaped television programs for each of your children, preferably without advertisements. Include favourite shows and educational programs you and the child have chosen together. Label each tape and keep them near the VCR for easy access.
- Talk to your children about their reactions to particular television content. Ask them what they think is funny, sad, boring, violent, interesting, etc. Don't pass judgement. Simply listen to their responses, ask questions and express opinions based on your views.
- Help your children learn how television is made, how the television industry works and how financial and marketing considerations affect what we see on television. The local library has books which explain television appropriate to all age levels.

- Involve your children in writing a television station, film studio or advertising sponsor regarding specific programs or ads which contain unnecessary violence. The local library has books which explain television appropriate to all age levels.
- Praise what is praiseworthy on television and encourage your children to use television to learn something new and to become more informed about the world, especially other countries and cultures.
- Don't make unfair generalizations about television content. State clearly which material you object to and why. Ask your children for their views.
- Find out which programs your children's friends are watching. Talk to their parents and seek their support in maintaining your viewing standards during after-school visits.
- Avoid banning bad television programs - it merely increases their glamour and attraction. Instead discuss and assess the program content with your child and suggest acceptable alternatives which have a similar theme.
- Encourage your children to talk back to television by noting programs which contain unnecessary violence, sexist remarks, false or misleading ads, new bias, etc. Compare these shows portraying pro-social behaviour, positive relationships, and non-violent conflict resolution
- Arrange family field trips, library visits and week-end excursions based on your children's favourite television or movie themes. Try to supplement their viewing with real life experiences and opportunities to expand their knowledge (e.g. attend a dinosaur exhibit after viewing '*Jurassic Park*').
- Encourage your children to read the books used as the basis for movies and television shows. Discuss possible reasons for differences in plot, structure, location, dialogue and character.
- Never allow young or sensitive children to attend movies alone - even if the film is advertised as a children's film.
- If your children are frightened by a scary film or television program, talk to them, encourage them to express their feelings and reassure them.
- If your children appear to believe that television portrayals of lawyers, policemen, private detectives, etc. are accurate, consider inviting a practicing policeman or lawyer over for coffee to talk about their work.
- Ask your children to compare media heroes with real life heroes. Discuss what makes a hero and ask them to think of ways they might become someone's hero.

- Encourage your children to talk about the consequences of violent behaviour in real life and think about whether the media accurately portrays these consequences.
- After viewing a situation comedy, talk to your children about whether television families are different from real families. Discuss with them differences in housing, wardrobe, language, lifestyle, neatness standards, and humour.
- Take your children to a department store to examine toys which they have seen advertised on television. Discuss whether the real toy is as attractive and exciting as the toys shown in the ad.
- Plan activities and outings for Saturday mornings to avoid violent cartoons and advertisements aimed at impressionable children.
- Plan 'no-TV weekends'. Organize healthy and entertaining alternative activities such as those suggested in *"365 TV Free Activities You Can Do With Your Child"* by Steve and Ruth Bennet.
- Before Christmas and birthdays, consult consumer guides, toy reports and parent magazines to find out about non-violent, non-sexist and challenging toys, books, video games and computer software.
- TAKE - don't send your children to the video store. Assist them in making a list of non-violent titles appropriate to their age levels and interests. Keep the list for future visits.
- Your example is more powerful than your words. Examine your television and video viewing habits and determine whether adjustments are needed.

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